

The real arts centre is White Rock

Attempts to save the 1914 White Rock schoolhouse on the site of White Rock Elementary have revived notions of an arts centre for the city.

If the original schoolhouse can be saved from an as-yet puzzling imperative to obliterate it, the building will remain, like the dual icons of the Pier and the old Burlington Northern Station, as one of the few survivals of historic White Rock amid towering, monolithic examples of post-modernism.

In spite of its age, it would be perfectly able, as the station does, to function as the focal point of a valid local interest. The station has been, for more than a decade, the logical home of White Rock Museum and Archives.

But it's worth remembering that, at one time, it was also functional as the Station Arts Centre—a gallery space, a meeting and rehearsal and even intimate performance space, and the focus of activities of the Community Arts Council and other arts groups.

It would be a mistake to consider a survival of the schoolhouse as the be-all and end-all for the arts community.



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The biggest pitfall in discussing an arts centre for White Rock is the notion that one building could do it all—a metaphoric putting all the eggs in one basket that helped sink the previous proposal, a decade ago.

That proposal, for the site of White Rock Playhouse, would have resulted in a new building which, however much it tried, could never have been all things to all people.

It would have left unaddressed, for example, the need for a large concert/performance space on the Semiahmoo Peninsula which is abundantly demonstrated by the continuing success of White Rock Concerts series. The series each year brings a full season of world-class classical concerts to the Peninsula, but must continue to rent a church to serve as occasional concert hall (the Bell Centre is too far away for the audience base).

It's ironic that had White Rock Concerts been allied to an organized religion or sports franchise, funding for a huge edifice would likely have been found years ago in the deep pockets of

Peninsula burghers.

The most enduring legacy of the earlier arts centre debacle, one suspects, is the lingering impression that the arts community in White Rock and South Surrey is a group of 'flakes' who cannot be relied upon to get their collective act together and must therefore be marginalized or excluded entirely from any development plan.

Those who would thus, for whatever conceivable reason, seek to divide and conquer the arts groups could do no better than to propose a single space and then let the contending potential users fight to the death for control of it.

The arts groups should learn from the past and be clever enough to stick together in the face of systematic erosion of their importance in this community.

Future fundraising must aggressively pursue the notion that the arts—and buildings to house them—are as vital to a healthy community and as deserving of space as any sports facility or commercial development.

White Rock shouldn't be seen as the location for any one 'arts centre'—it should be seen as the location for a number of facilities: de facto, as an arts centre itself.

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